ıcademe

Standing in for Mr. Bennett at the negie Foundation conference, As- ant Secretary Chester Finn nded a similar theme and received lamp response from the college sidents. But what Mr. Finn said is ntially what Carnegie said: That leges have "an affirmative respon- ility for moral development, for aracter formation, for democratic ues."

The college presidents seem reluc- t to accept this responsibility. At Carnegie conference, the Rev. othy Healy, president of George- n University, nostalgically eulo- ed "the dear, dead days when we 'in loco parentis.' " But college inistrators can no longer play the of surrogate parent, he said.

The Carnegie report found the nbivalence" that the Rev. Healy other college administrators feel ut their overall responsibility for dents' conduct "particularly dis- bing." It lamented the colleges' un- tainty about standards of behavior y should expect or require from dents. Too true.

The movie "Animal House" was ut the long-ago animals in a frat se. In many contemporary college ings, however, the animal house taken its act into auditoriums re the speaker is the U.S. secre- y of defense or others whose poli- are uncongenial to some under- ds. And of course the kids don't rely find philosophical justification mob politics among themselves. speakers' offending politics has eady received plenty of "moral" unciation in class from tweedy, ured adults. Shutting up the "ideo- ues" becomes an imperative moral that takes precedence over lesser nciples such as free speech. This is sort of muddled moral drivel Mr. nett has been attempting to wash of the colleges.

If there is a common theme to the

The Prudent Option in Iran

By John M. Poindexter

Managing foreign policy is rarely simple. The president must not only respond to events, but try to shape them as well. When countries of strategic significance, like Iran, are in the midst of transitions, one can choose to sit back and ride it out or try to be active and shape the emerging reality.

While the risks of action are always apparent, the risks and costs of inaction may be less obvious but frequently even more damaging. Few would argue that we paid a high price for not anticipating the potential for convulsive change in Iran in the late 1970s. Maybe there was little we could have done to alter the events of that time, but there is precious little evidence that we anticipated the profound changes that took place or did anything to position ourselves to shape or cope with that new reality.

We were overtaken and overwhelmed by the Iranian revolution and its aftermath. We were traumatized by the new regime and its virulent anti-American posture. Rather than continuing to paralyze us, that trauma ought to be a potent reminder of the costs of waiting for change and not trying to shape it.

Today, change is again looming in Iran and the signs have been apparent for some time. The current transition won't return us to the pre-1979 days, but the consequences and outcome of this transition – though remaining unclear – may still prove to be very dramatic. The actual unraveling and disintegration of Iran is a distinct possibility as the costs of war prove increasingly ruinous to the Iranian economy, factions harden and struggle intensifies in anticipation of Khomeini's eventual death.

Keeping the Country Intact

Neither we nor our regional friends have an interest in Iran's disintegration. Iran is a critical geographic and strategic buffer that physically separates the Soviet Union from the Persian Gulf. No one in the area wants to see that buffer disappear.

Pragmatic elements in the Iranian leadership understand what has been happening internally and the need to face up to their problems if they are to keep their country intact and sustain Mullah rule. At a minimum, they have begun to search for ways to reduce their international isolation and establish more normal relations with the outside world. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that we would begin to get "feelers" from intermediaries representing those in Iran who appreciate the problematic nature of their own situation.

We did not respond immediately to these signals. Rather, we wanted to be sure that the signals were coming from credible, authoritative leaders. We had and continue to have no illusions about the individuals we have been dealing with or what could emerge from this dialogue.

A pro-U.S. leadership that invites us back into Iran is not in the cards. But that's also not necessary to serve our interests of building peace and stability in this region; of maintaining a bulwark against Soviet expansionism; or of ending a brutal war whose hideous consumption of human life – especially a nation's precious youth – is almost without precedent, yet has seemingly escaped public attention in the U.S.

What we seek is an Iran that lives at peace with its neighbors; that desires neither to undermine them nor to export revolution; and that no longer supports terror as an instrument of policy. We accept the Islamic revolution as a fact and believe that an Iran that is independent, economically healthy, and living in peace with its neighbors can be a force for stability in the region.

That, of course, requires the emergence of an Iranian leadership that is prepared to accept a similar vision and role for Iran. We have seen the growth of such pragmatic elements in Iran, and, as a result, we began a tentative, probing dialogue with them. As a minimum, we were building a channel for communication.

As this dialogue began, it was characterized by deep mutual suspicion – rooted in history with painful, vivid images and memories on both sides. We each sought to probe the motives and seriousness of the other. For the Iranians – who were running great personal risks – a demonstration of presidential involvement and support for the dialogue was deemed essential; in their eyes, since only the president could authorize a sale of military material of some sort, this was viewed as a clear and convincing measure of presidential support. Moreover, arms are an important, valued commodity in the Middle East. The amount of arms – for that matter even the type – was not that important. In fact, the amount sold equated to about 1/1000 the total value of arms already bought by Iran during the war. It was also clear that the arms embargo was not to be lifted, nor was this their objective. What was important was the demonstration of power and willingness to make the limited exception to sell arms: a sign of serious intent in our dialogue.

For our part, we needed Iranian demonstrations as well. We told our interlocuters that we must see signs of Iranian opposition to the use of terrorism and that they must also help gain the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon. There were signs: Iranian public opposition to the use of terror; the cessation of hostage taking by some Iranian-supported factions; the arrest of government officials linked to terrorist activities; Iranian intercession with the TWA hijackers last summer in Beirut; their quick opposition to the Pan Am hijacking in Karachi and their immediate and public denial of landing rights; and the release of Benjamin Weir, Father Jenco, and David Jacobson, held in Lebanon by the Islamic Jihad.

Those who now question us owe the country an explanation of how they would have acted differently given the stakes, the opportunities and the dangers.

Throughout, it is important to note, the policy basis of all our actions – overt and covert – was consistent: bring about an end to the Iran-Iraq war, and stop state-sponsored terrorism. Actions to achieve policy objectives should not be confused with the objectives themselves. For example, our arms embargo is not a policy objective but simply an action taken to bring about an end to the Iran-Iraq war.

Let me reiterate one point: The Iranians who have been part of this dialogue and who have been responsible for these demonstrations are not pro-American. They are pro-Iranian. It is their understanding of Iranian needs and the importance of community that is motivating them.

Would it be responsible for us not to try to reach out to such groups – especially when they indicate a desire for a dialogue and contact with us? Would we serve U.S. interests or the interests of our friends in the Gulf if we were to avoid building relations with these groups as the process of jockeying for position in the post-Khomeini period has gotten under way? How many would be quick to castigate us – or any administration – for not using a variety of instruments to position ourselves to deal with the looming struggle in Iran?

If Iran were a country with little strategic weight or significance, we could afford to take a relaxed, disinterested view of developments there. Unfortunately, we can not. The Persian Gulf's importance will not simply fade away. It remains a critical strategic crossroads. Moreover, while the oil market of today may suggest diminished importance, in the mid-1990s that is not likely to be the case any longer – and stability in the region will continue to be vital to the well-being of the Western world.

Stakes Justified the Risk

We must think ahead and think strategically. We are, as a result, working strategically, trying to enhance the longer-term stability of this vital region. In the course of doing so, we are not losing sight of our near-term objectives of ending the war honorably; stopping state-supported terror; and getting our hostages out of Lebanon.

We felt we were making progress in each of those areas. With publicity overwhelming this sensitive undertaking, it is not clear what will now happen to this dialogue.

What is clear, however, is that we took a calculated risk in going ahead with the dialogue and developing it. The president believes that the strategic objectives we were pursuing and the stakes involved in Iran justified this risk. Leadership often requires tough decisions and tough choices. Statesmanship is rarely revealed when the choices are easy.

Those who question us now are right to do so. But rather than only criticize what we did, they owe the country an explanation of how they would have acted differently given the stakes, the opportunities and the dangers. They need to tell us how and why they would have turned aside the kinds of overtures we were receiving. They need to tell us how they would have gone about protecting such an obviously sensitive mission. And they need to tell us how they would safeguard our interests in circumstances where the future stability of this vital region may hinge on the unfolding drama in Iran today.

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